

## **The English Teacher as Facilitator and Authority**

**Shaun O'Dwyer**

**David English House, Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan**

**School of Philosophy, University of New South Wales**

**<shaunodwyer@yahoo.com.au>**

### **Abstract**

Over the past eighty years or so, some education theorists have repudiated the notion that it is the teacher's role to act as an authority in the classroom, transmitting knowledge to students "who do not know." In English as a second or foreign language education, a notion of the teacher as "facilitator" is considered to be more compatible with students' felt needs and autonomy. This paper argues that there are epistemological flaws in prominent rejections of transmission theories of learning. Drawing on British philosopher Michael Oakeshott's distinction between technical and practical knowledge, it argues for a modified understanding of the English teacher both as an authority capable of transmitting these types of knowledge in language, and as a facilitator of cooperative language learning.

### **Introduction**

In the teaching of English as a second or foreign language today, the old pedagogical ideal of the teacher as an authority transmitting knowledge to students "who do not know" is in disrepute. The ideal now is for a more democratic, student-centered approach, in which the teacher facilitates communicative educational activities with students. This model reflects in part the influence of communication-based theories of language acquisition. But it also reflects, in large part, the influence of different pragmatist and progressive education theorists ranging from John Dewey (1916) to Malcolm Knowles (1970). Such an approach stresses the importance of learner autonomy and responsibility for the learning process, and attributes greater value to the learner's experience and knowledge in the classroom.

However, there are good reasons for thinking that a student-centred approach should not completely displace a teacher-centred, authoritative approach to English teaching.

Calls for the abandonment of the latter approach proceed from flawed epistemological assumptions about how knowledge is generated in linguistic practice. That students learn the knowledge embodied in language actively, even autonomously, is not denied here. But I will argue that what can be defined as the technical and practical knowledge of a language *is also* transmitted from teachers to students in classroom settings (although teachers are only one of a number of possible agents of transmission). Progressive education theorists such as Malcolm Knowles have stressed the importance of students' experience as a "rich resource" for each other's learning in the classroom (Knowles, 1970, p. 44; 1984, p. 10). While acknowledging this point, I wish to emphasise the continued importance of the traditional knowledge inherited in language, which it is the teacher's role both to impart, and to encourage learning of, in a classroom setting.

To the extent that the above claims are true, there is strong justification for believing that the teacher is authoritative in her capacity as a (fallible!) source of technical and practical knowledge. But there is also strong justification for believing that collaborative, student-centred approaches to English education should compliment rather than conflict with an understanding of the teacher as an authority.

### **Some Flaws in the Epistemology of Student-Centred Learning Theory**

Learner-centred education methods and criticisms of teacher authority have a long history in educational thought. Throughout this history, a commonly stressed theme has been the capacity of the student as an inquirer and self-directed learner, rather than a passive recipient of knowledge. John Dewey's inquiry-based philosophy of education conceptualised the learning process as a "shared activity" in which "the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher" (1916, p. 160). Dewey opposed the "crutch of dogma, of beliefs fixed by authority" in education (1916, p. 339). It was anathema to his experimental theory of knowledge that education should take place through students passively imbibing their teachers' knowledge, and that custom alone should determine what counted as knowledge. In more recent times, Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy rejected what he called the "banking concept" of education, "in which the students are the depositaries and the teacher is the depositor. In which the scope of action allowed to the students only extends as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits" of knowledge bestowed upon them by teachers (1970, p. 58). This relationship negates the creative and critical powers of students (Freire, 1970, p. 60). Finally, and under Dewey's influence, constructivist psychologists, such as George Kelly, stressed the cognitive powers of ordinary human beings to build up their own, autonomous understandings or "constructs" of their world. They make sense of that world and test their personal hypotheses about it much as scientists do (Kelly, 1963, pp. 129, 154, & 157). Dewey's and Freire's emphasis upon democratic, student-centred education has ultimately filtered into English language teaching theory and training (see, for example, Wajnryb, 1999, p. 119). Kelly's ideas have similarly been influential in fostering student-centred learning approaches in English language education (see

Williams & Burden, 1997, pp. 27-28; Paul, 2003, pp. 175-176).

Critics of the traditional concept of teacher authority typically develop the following argument: If we believe that the knowledge the teacher possesses is infallible, and if we believe education takes place only by way of a transmission of such knowledge from teachers to students *who initially have no knowledge*, then the teacher must be vested with a great deal of power over students for education to take place at all. Students must uncritically defer to the teacher's intellectual *and* political authority in the classroom, accepting what they are told and doing as they are told in order to receive their teachers' knowledge. They have little knowledge of their own to contribute to the education process, and little with which to question legitimately what they are learning. The result of accepting such beliefs about teacher authority is an unacceptably passive and unequal role in learning for students, who are left with very limited opportunities for creative expression in the classroom. Worst of all from a student-centred learning perspective in English teaching, students have little chance to become inquirers, or self-directed learners (Paul, 2003, p. 24).

For some education theorists, the path to a more student-centred, democratic style of learning is clear if transmission theories of learning and their associated concept of teacher authority are rejected. One of the foremost of these theorists, Malcolm Knowles (1970; 1984), argued for a distinctive approach in adult education called "andragogy." The three following assumptions characterise his theory of adult education:

1. Older models of education that emphasise the transmission of knowledge from teachers to passive recipients need to be rejected.
2. The transmission model needs to be replaced with a problem-solving model of learning involving cooperation between students and teachers and utilizing the students' own experience as educational resources.
3. Students should be treated as autonomous individuals capable of assuming responsibility for their learning process within this co-operative model of learning.

The critical focus of this paper will be on the relationship between assumptions (1) and (2) above; the problems with assumption (3) have already been dealt with elsewhere (see Pratt, 1988, pp. 160-181). These assumptions are common to many progressive, humanistic, and constructivist education theorists, working with both child and adult students. But in *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (1970), Knowles presented in a clear and uncompromising form the epistemic rationale for modern education strategies that have rejected transmission theories of learning and advocated a student-centred learning practice.<sup>[1]</sup> For this reason, I will take his epistemic rationale as a representative one. In the view of an education theorist such as Knowles, the increasing pace of scientific and technological change over the past two hundred years or so has undercut the traditional ideal of pedagogical practice. This ideal, practiced by generations of pedagogues, proceeds from the following assumption: knowledge, as a store of customarily validated beliefs accumulated by previous generations, can only be

acquired through a knowledgeable person instilling it into the minds of novices.

The problem with this ideal, according to Knowles, is that the lifespan of knowledge has been getting shorter since the Industrial Revolution. The modern era has been marked by continuous technological and intellectual innovation, so that many kinds of knowledge and skill have become obsolete at a more rapid rate than in the past. In the past, traditional knowledge could last many lifetimes. But a person living today will likely witness a number of phases of introduction, use, and obsolescence of knowledge as new technologies enter into and go out of currency. In such changed circumstances the ideal of imparting knowledge that is intended to prepare a person for a lifetime has ceased to be relevant. Knowles writes:

So it is no longer functional to define education as a process of transmitting what is known; it must now be defined as a lifelong process of discovering what is not known. What children should learn is not what adults think they ought to know, but how to inquire. That is why traditional pedagogy is irrelevant to the modern needs for the education of both children and adults. (1970, p. 38)

Half a century earlier, John Dewey had proclaimed the death-knell for unreflective, traditional knowledge, and hailed a more experimental-minded mode of experiencing as the way forward in diverse fields, such as education and morals:

Aforetime man employed the results of his prior experience only to form customs that henceforth had to be blindly followed or blindly broken. Now, old experience is used to suggest aims and methods for developing a new and improved experience. Consequently, experience becomes in so far constructively self-regulative. (1920 {1982}, p. 134).

For Knowles as for Dewey, a new educational ideal suited to our times will equip people to inquire cooperatively into the changes erected by a more dynamic social environment, to produce new knowledge rather than just rely upon the knowledge inherited from the past. In this, they make common cause with constructivist psychologists and language education theorists who emphasise the human capacity to learn autonomously, to find their own meaning in the world and test their findings in experience (Kelly 1963, pp. 4-5; Bannister & Fransella, 1974, p.21; Williams & Burden, 1997, pp. 27-28). If this ideal is correct, then it has serious implications for the assumption that the teacher is an authority, insofar as she possesses knowledge that students do not yet have. Since knowledge often becomes obsolete within a single lifetime, there is little relevant knowledge that a teacher can pass on to students in the course of her career. Without that, the teacher has little intellectual authority; and so there is no basis for the sort of political authority that demands uncritical deference and obedience from students. Knowles left his readers with more egalitarian descriptions of the teacher: "a procedural technician, resource person, and co-inquirer; he is more a catalyst than an instructor, more a guide than a wizard" (Knowles, 1970, p. 43).

There are two reasons for thinking that this epistemic rationale for student-centred learning is mistaken, in spite of its appeal. Firstly, Knowles's claim that established knowledge and skills have a shorter life span than in the pre-industrial past is overstated. It also ignores the continuity in skills and knowledge that arguably occurs through the development of even modern practices. In applied, technical fields such as computer engineering and programming, Knowles' insight does have some application. But it certainly does not apply to many of the arts--say, to music, dance or painting, all of which exhibit a long continuity in the content of skills that students have learnt throughout their history. For example, in the course of his education a classical ballet dancer will acquire a repertoire of skilled movements that greatly expands on those taught to 19th century dancers. Yet it also incorporates them and is continuous with them.

Nor does Knowles's insight apply very well to academic disciplines, such as history, biology, and chemistry. In these fields there undoubtedly have been enormous advances in knowledge, such that the content of what students learn is very different and more complex compared to what they learnt a lifetime ago. But, the underlying investigative practices of these disciplines have a long, continuous history. Knowles believed that learning "how to inquire" rather than learning what "adults think children ought to know" should be a central aim for students. But is there not something traditional in the very practice of inquiry? It would be counter-intuitive to claim that "learning how to inquire" is a process that each generation undertakes anew, without any transmission in knowledge of "how to inquire" from prior generations.

Constructivists may say that the desire to discover and make sense of the world actively is inherent in human cognitive development--and it is natural in children (see Paul, 2003, p. 24). But that development takes shape within a social medium, populated by parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and so on. Constructivists assert this point, too (see Salmon, 1995, pp. 21-22; Williams & Burden, 1997, pp. 39-40). Yet, there is a certain reluctance to acknowledge the value of imparted habits, including habits of inquiry, as the very stock-in-trade of this social medium. The infant's impulsive, inchoate graspings and probings are, from the beginning, subject to that social medium, and shaped into controlled habits of learning and problem-solving. Here we could just as much stress dependence upon the instruction and example of others as inherent in human cognitive development; we cannot learn to inquire or solve problems without the example and instruction of others. Curiosity and the desire to assimilate the unknown may well be inherent impulses, but inquiry is an acquired skill. In disciplines such as history, the sciences, and so on it makes sense to view it as a *traditional* skill, one that is transmitted by explicit instruction as well as by example, in a shared practice (for a discussion of inquiry in these terms, see O'Dwyer, 2001, pp. 494-495). The chemist and philosopher of science, Carl Polyani, once gave a simple justification for this claim in science education: "The large amount of time spent by students of chemistry, biology and medicine in their practical courses shows how greatly these sciences rely on the transmission of skills and connoisseurship from master to apprentice" (Polyani, 1958, p.

55). In this light a dedicated androgogue or other student-centred teacher will only succeed in her job if she accepts that at least one thing students "ought to know" is how to inquire. That in turn requires her to impart and teach its habits and techniques.

Secondly, Knowles's idea gives much greater emphasis to innovation and the generation of new knowledge over the acquisition of traditional knowledge. This assumption is ultimately counterintuitive in the context of language learning. Before any new knowledge is created, there must be *something* out there to be discovered and experimented with. The everyday language students encounter in or out of the classroom seems to be appropriate, and there is much that is traditional in it. Moreover, without a teacher or skilled language speaker who can present the knowledge to be experimented with in a structured, graduated, and comprehensible manner, and who can guide, observe, and correct errors in usage, such a process of discovery is often haphazard, and growth in knowledge a matter of accident (unless motivation to learn is strong). Finally, without a teacher or other skilled speaker who can serve as a linguistic exemplar, someone whose example can be followed, a learner is likely to miss out on important nuances in language that can only be communicated from person to person (Polyani's "transmission of skills and connoisseurship"). This is not to say that in order to be effective the English language classroom must always be teacher-centred and didactic. Rather, the nature of second or foreign language acquisition and learning in a classroom setting is such that a teacher-centred approach cannot always be avoided in the learning process. This approach will be necessary intermittently even at later stages as students struggle with more complex aspects of the language. To become a competent user of a second language, a student must partake of a linguistic inheritance different from her own. In the classroom it will be the teacher first of all who will play the part of inducting her into it.

In his book *Rationalism in Politics* (1962), the British philosopher Michael Oakeshott developed a useful distinction between kinds of knowledge in practices, explained below. This distinction will permit me both to show more clearly what types of knowledge language teachers and other skilled language users impart or teach to students, and to qualify how we may understand teachers as being authoritative in such types of knowledge.

### **Practical and Technical Knowledge in Language**

First of all, let me clarify the understanding of "practice" that has been implicit up to this point. A practice is a coherent, interdependent set of skilled habits that possesses a continuous identity through time. Successful observance of its habits requires commitment to tacit norms of behaviour and often (but not always) explicitly stated rules and techniques of competence that have evolved within the history of that practice. In all practices, including arts, sciences, sports, or languages, Oakeshott claimed that there are two kinds of knowledge: technical knowledge and practical knowledge. Practical knowledge comprises the habits and skills of usage--the unreflective "ways of

doing things" that are particular to a practice. According to Oakeshott, "Its normal expression is in a customary or traditional way of doing things, or, simply, in practice." Such knowledge is not directly "taught nor learned, but only imparted or acquired" (1962, pp. 10, 11). The practical knowledge of a language includes its characteristic pragmatics, the tacit norms and etiquette governing communication, pronunciation habits, appropriate uses of vocabulary and the habitual and idiomatic ways of communicating in a language, many of which are difficult or impossible to put into rules.[2]

Although Oakeshott only infrequently discussed language learning, we can infer from his analysis of practical knowledge that people acquire such knowledge in language by example, as native speakers or fluent second language speakers impart it to them *and* as they practice and refine their skill in it. Through immersion in a native-speaker or skilled second-language speaker environment, or exposure to teacher talk in classrooms, a language learner can "pick up" by example a sense for when and where certain ways of speaking are considered acceptable or unacceptable. He will also pick up a sense for the appropriate uses of idiomatic language. All of this takes place through (1) observation of and interaction with more skilled language speakers, and (2) practice modelled on their example and subject to their correction. The degree to which he acquires this knowledge is conditioned both by his capacity to build and refine a linguistic map that accommodates itself to and assimilates new knowledge, and by the language skills of the individuals who are imparting that knowledge. It is, however, very difficult to acquire this sense for appropriate usage from textbooks or dictionaries.

Technical knowledge of a language, on the other hand, comprises those aspects of language practice that can be put into rules. Oakeshott wrote:

In every art and science, and in every practical activity, a technique is involved. In many activities this technical knowledge is formulated into rules which are, or may be, deliberately learned, remembered, and, as we say, put into practice. (1962, p. 7)

In the case of languages, grammatical rules, conventions, and stock formulaic expressions comprise their technical knowledge. Unlike practical knowledge, this form of knowledge is not imparted, though it can be transmitted and learned directly, by means of instruction, rote-learning and the study of textbooks.

Oakeshott's distinction between practical and technical knowledge is a functional distinction, drawn only for the purposes of critical reflection upon practice. In language classrooms teachers and students do not often consciously experience the distinction between technical and practical knowledge. They are intermixed in the usual run of things: as Oakeshott put it, they are "distinguishable but inseparable" (1962, p. 10). A commonplace illustration of this intermixture is someone instructing a person in a new skill at the same time as she is demonstrating it. While the learner is taking in explicit



instructions in the skill's performance, he will pick up an intuitive sense for how to perform some unspoken aspect of that skill. He may do so without either himself or his instructress realising it (Oakeshott, 1962, p. 11).<sup>[3]</sup>

Nonetheless, Oakeshott claimed that technical knowledge is not derived from practical knowledge. The technique of a practice comprises whatever aspects of that practice can be or are formulated into rules. Its practical knowledge, on the other hand, "cannot be formulated in rules" (1962, p. 8). However, if we consider the example of pre-literate societies with no written grammars and no formalised methods for teaching language, it would appear that *all* of their linguistic knowledge, in being imparted, is of the "practical" variety. Written grammars and language textbooks by linguists and native speakers, when they do appear, are derivative abstractions from previously unwritten, unformalised language practices. I would argue that we understand the relationship between technical and practical knowledge in a language as, ultimately, a derivative relationship. Grammatical rules, conventions and formulae are partial abstractions from what generations of grammarians, linguists and teachers have considered to be "best" language practice. They cannot be anything more than a partial abstraction of language habits, for there is much in language practice that cannot be put into explicit rules. Unlike Oakeshott, then, I prefer to say that technical knowledge comprises those aspects of a practice that *have already* been articulated from general usage. They function to guide students in learning those aspects of language use that can be learnt directly, and to provide standards for evaluating language use.

There is a degree of overlap between technical and practical knowledge, especially since the former derives from the latter, and both are transmitted, albeit by different means. However, it is the nature of practical knowledge that it is flexible and adaptable in use, and subject to continuous change. As an increasingly internationalised language, English is especially characterized by these traits. In this respect, at least Knowles's emphasis upon constant change in modern skills is appropriate, even if his perspective overlooks continuity in practice through time. On the other hand, a language's technical knowledge can be quite inflexible. It can be a source of bewilderment for students--and teachers--when everyday usage does not conform to it, and when rules cannot adequately explain some aspect of usage. Moreover, overzealous attempts to correct practice with them impedes unreflective language acquisition, making it top-heavy with critical reflection (on the problem of reflection-heavy practice, see Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 74; 78-79). Nonetheless, the rules and conventions of English grammar are the best thing we have for maintaining standards of mutual intelligibility between English speakers from diverse cultures.

There are some affinities between Oakeshott's analysis of knowledge in practices and Stephen Krashen's theory of language acquisition. The mastering of a language's technical knowledge roughly corresponds with what Krashen terms language *learning*, and the acquisition of its practical knowledge can be compared with his concept of language *acquisition*. There are also two critical differences that I want to highlight,



however. For Krashen, language learning and language acquisition are fundamentally distinct "ways of developing competence in second languages" (Krashen & Terrill, 1983, p. 26), and excepting some limited circumstances where rules can perform a "monitoring" role, language learning has no appreciable effect on language acquisition (Krashen & Terrill, 1983, p. 30).

Firstly, however, the practical/technical knowledge distinction as I have formulated it permits a degree of transformation of one knowledge type into the other. It may therefore be characterised as an "interface" position in language learning/acquisition theory, in contrast to Krashen's non-interface position, for which the products of language learning and acquisition are quite distinct. As I pointed out above, technical knowledge historically derives itself from practical knowledge, articulating those of its aspects that can be put into rules (see Ellis, 1985, pp. 234-235 for a summary of "interface" and "non-interface" theoretical positions).

Secondly, technical knowledge performs a rather more extensive role than Krashen would allow to the products of language learning. It provides valuable tools for explicitly guiding and correcting language usage, *when a felt need arises to do so*. A language student can learn these tools in order to engage in grammatical consciousness raising, using them to augment and self-correct her spoken and written expression, and to make reflective changes to the linguistic map of how her new language works (see Rutherford, 1987, pp. 16-34).

If we accept the perspective upon language acquisition and learning that this distinction between practical and technical knowledge affords us, we can outline what an English teacher's authority amounts to. We can also find out how that authority is compatible with the latter-day emphasis upon the teacher's role as a facilitator in language teaching.

### **The English Teacher as Facilitator and as Authority**

The definitions of practical and technical knowledge above make it clear that linguistic knowledge is transmitted *and* learned--skilled speakers and teachers teach it or impart it to learners, who acquire it by example and learn it directly. On the other hand, if we accept this point, there may be a case for *not* making the teacher an authority apart from other sources of language acquisition and learning. Other native speakers or skilled second language speakers may be just as able to impart linguistic habits and skills. Perhaps teachers have no distinct intellectual authority in this regard.

However, irrespective of whether teachers are native speakers or skilled second language speakers themselves, there is reason for thinking that as educated practitioners of the language, they have (or ought to have) a high level of practical knowledge in its pragmatics, registers, appropriate vocabulary use, and in its reading and writing skills. They should also have the special ability to communicate English as "comprehensible

input" to students; that is, to "rough-tune" their classroom language and reading materials to students' comprehension levels (Krashen & Terrill, 1983, pp. 34-35). In possessing at least a university degree and a postgraduate TESOL or TEFL qualification, they should have satisfactorily demonstrated and been tested in those skills in the past. With experience and application they can aim to be authoritative models whose example can be trusted as a guide for sound linguistic practice. To that degree, deference on students' part to their teachers' *intellectual* authority is justified. But deference means no more than this: that students trust and follow the example set by their teachers, in the belief that they are most likely good examples to follow. These skills do not set teachers as a kind apart from others who may, and do serve as examples to be followed in this manner, in or out of the classroom. They do potentially set them up as exemplary agents in that process, especially in English as a foreign language classrooms, where access to the target language outside of the classroom is much more limited.

Teachers' grasp of the technical knowledge of a language gives added reason for recognising them as such potentially exemplary, authoritative agents. Of course, students who have previously studied English through the grammar translation method in their high school system can arrive at an adult classroom with high technical knowledge of its grammar. They may even be able to remedy deficiencies in their teachers' knowledge in classroom grammar discussions. However, teachers' possession of practical and technical knowledge permits them to model usage, in incidental teacher talk, in written and spoken presentation and in drills. It also allows them to formalise aspects of usage just beyond the students' current levels of competence, and provide critical feedback to students' performance, through reference to general evaluative standards. Teachers' ability to refer to and articulate such standards in evaluating practice provides students with guidance in their progress, and with a measure of the progress they have already achieved. Here deference is important as well, in the sense that students obtain an idea of their strengths and weaknesses in their skills by listening carefully to and trusting their teachers' assessments. Once students have internalised evaluative standards and are able to engage in self-assessment and self-monitoring, they can move away from complete dependence upon their teachers' evaluations.

Much of what I have said may seem contrary to Knowles's and other theorists' recommendations for respect for student autonomy in the adult classroom. However, empirical studies in adult education have indicated that autonomy is a "situational attribute," not a trait a person inevitably acquires as she matures. Students' possession of such an attribute varies according to cultural background and psychological make-up (see Jarvis, 1983, p. 100; Pratt, 1988, pp.161-162; Devine, 2000, pp. 67-77; Yoell, 2000). In some cultures, learner autonomy is not valued highly, and students may become confused by, and even resist, exhortations to greater self-directedness in learning. More to the point, once we admit that learning/acquisition of skill in a practice does involve transmission of knowledge, we must also admit dependence upon the intellectual authority of persons responsible for transferring that knowledge as an inevitable aspect

of education. Yet dependence too is a situational attribute, one that is "momentary, situationally specific and therefore changeable" (Pratt, 1988, p. 170). As students' confidence increases and as both they and their teachers are willing to foster shared decision-making in classes, there is more chance of them becoming self-directed and motivated enough to have input into the direction and composition of classroom activities. In such circumstances, teachers' roles as facilitators will be much more prominent.

Oakeshott regarded the master-apprentice relation as the model for the imparting of practical knowledge (1962, p. 11. For a forceful restatement of this conviction in contemporary debates over quality assurance in education, see Gonzalez & Burwood, 2003, pp. 387-388). I think that this metaphor also captures the character of the English teacher's relationship to her students as both authority and facilitator. Some readers may think it is a politically incorrect choice of metaphor. To be understood in a fairer light, the transmission of practical and technical knowledge from master to apprentice should be interpreted in the context of a shared *practice*. Understood thus, it is fundamentally different to the sort of transmission model of learning that Dewey, Freire, and Knowles criticised. In this latter kind of knowledge transmission the necessarily empty minds of students are opened "to the deposits of reality from the world outside" (Freire, 1970, p. 62), and instructional settings are artificially isolated from opportunities for students to practice meaningfully what they are being taught.

On the other hand, the imparting of practical knowledge and the learning of technical knowledge within a practice is bound up with *practice* in the literal sense. Students experiment with what they are learning from instruction, and discovering from exposure to the examples that teachers and other, more skilled students are setting. It is only through such experimentation that students can become knowledgeable, experienced practitioners of a skill, just as apprentices become skilled in a practice through hands-on work that follows the example of their masters and mistresses. Moreover, it has to be remembered that this relationship is meritocratic: with growing experience and skill, apprentices can approach and even surpass their teachers' skills. The master/mistress-apprentice relationship conceived through this perspective accommodates (with *some* qualifications) two important responsibilities for English teachers as facilitators of learning.

One of these responsibilities is to foster a practice-based language study environment, with orientation towards what Knowles terms "more participatory experiential" techniques (1970, p. 45). These include planning group work activities in discussions, games and role-plays, preparing listening, reading and writing activities that connect meaningfully with students' felt needs *and* with pedagogical aims, as well as allowing more spontaneous conversations to take place. In all of these interactions students have opportunities to discover and fine-tune linguistic habits. They can experiment with these habits, undergo the consequences of their actions in the comprehension, incomprehension and corrections they receive from their interlocutors or readers, make

adjustments in light of those consequences, and draw inferences about improved performance in future interactions.

In this sort of classroom practice, there is scope for mutually undertaken evaluation with the teacher devoting her "energy to helping the students get evidence for themselves about the progress they are making towards their learning goals" (Knowles, 1970, p. 43). Nonetheless, in accordance with the conception of authoritative teaching outlined above, the teacher would take a leading role in modelling linguistic practice, and in providing instructions, corrections and guidance towards learning goals - albeit with less frequency as students' proficiency increases.

A second, related responsibility for teachers is to help "the students exploit their own experiences as sources for learning" in the planning and conduct of lessons (Knowles, 1970, p. 53). For example, felt needs arising from students' prior experience, such as a desire to remedy an English language deficiency in a career where English has become a vital skill, can play a major role in setting class learning goals. Prior experiences of difficulties with some aspect of English communication, and evaluations of those difficulties, can inform decisions about which problem areas to request teachers to focus upon in classes. Insights from past experiences of English language and intercultural communication can make positive contributions to lesson content, in the form of students' anecdotes, observations, and role play and discussion suggestions. Finally, students' growing knowledge of a language can help them contribute to discussions about problem areas in grammar and practice. All of these contributions can influence the direction lessons take and give added significance to their content, often in ways that teachers cannot anticipate.

Yet, the following qualification is in order. An appropriate balance must be struck between what the individual experience and knowledge of students has to offer and what the experience embodied in the traditional, practical knowledge of a language has to contribute to the education process[4]. This experience is richly funded by accretions deposited over hundreds of years, as anonymous practitioners, poets, writers and grammarians have made their successive contributions. When language learners interact with native speaker or skilled second language speaker friends, mentors or teachers, they discover this funded experience *and* have it passed on to them. Talented learners may eventually become innovative practitioners in their new language, contributing new knowledge to its fund. To be able to do so, they first need to have served an apprenticeship of sorts in the traditional knowledge of that language.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments developed in this paper draw on a liberal philosophical legacy in education theory. To insist on the general correctness of the transmission theory of learning, and upon the importance of pedagogical authority in effective English teaching as I have done will appear unfashionable by the lights of progressive and constructivist

language education theories. However, the anti-authority and individualistic bias of some education theories arguably leads them to make too sweeping a rejection of transmission theories of learning. It also leads them to overvalue the individual knowledge of students at the expense of the collective knowledge that it was traditionally regarded as the teacher's role to transmit. This paper has laid out a compromise position, adapting an Oakeshottian analysis of the kinds of knowledge in language practice to identify how teachers can act as both authorities and facilitators in English language classrooms.

## Notes

[1] However, in spite of his figurehead status amongst progressive education thinkers, and in spite of scepticism for tradition in his educational works, Dewey had his own transmission theory. In a criticism of atomistic individualist theories of learning, he once wrote that "knowledge is a function of association and communication; it depends upon tradition, upon tools and methods socially transmitted, developed and sanctioned" (Dewey, 1954 {1927}, p.158).

[2] Recent research has shown that students taught generic forms of polite address in English in their home countries can still find themselves ill-adapted to the tacit norms governing polite communication within particular English speaking cultures (see Conlon, 2000, pp. 39-49).

[3] Ellis (1985) cites a study by Terrill (1980) that lends support to this idea. In her study, Terrill observes that junior high school students of Spanish acquired question forms in Spanish, in spite of the fact that their teacher had not taught those forms directly to them. It emerged that they had acquired them through "having internalised the syntax of Spanish questions as a result of answering the large number of teacher questions *used to drill other structures*" (my emphasis; see Ellis, 1985, p. 232). Indeed, in spite of their "teacher-centred" character, pattern/ "repeat after me" drills can be a rich source of practical and technical linguistic knowledge, including pronunciation and stress. This is especially so in English as a foreign language learning environments where the teacher's role as a linguistic model is more prominent. Constructivist dismissals of pattern drilling tend to miss these points (see for example, Williams & Burden, 1997, pp. 10-11)

[4] Like Dewey, I reject the idea that experience is essentially subjective and individual in character. Experience is an existence that "has its own objective and definitive traits" such as continuity, which "can be described without reference to a self". Nonetheless, "for some purposes and with respect to some consequences, it is all important to note the added qualification of ownership" (See Dewey 1958 {1925}, p. 232).

## Acknowledgments

This paper started life as an in-service presentation at Australia Pacific College, Sydney in August 2001. My thanks are due to Cathy Cox and Janice Ford for insightful comments and criticisms on that occasion. I would also like to thank Walter Davies, two referees at TESL-EJ and the Editor of TESL-EJ for comments and criticisms of earlier drafts of this paper.

## References

- Bannister, D. & Fransella, F. (1974). *Inquiring man*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Conlon, C. (2000). "Fine thank you, and how are you?" Linguistic politeness in Australian English and the interlanguage pragmatics of Japanese ESL Speakers. *Proceedings of the 13th Annual EA Education Conference*, 39-49.
- Devine, T. (2000). English for autonomy, autonomy in English: Students' and teachers' beliefs about autonomy in language learning. *Proceedings of the 13th Annual EA Education Conference*, 67-77.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1982 {1920}). *Reconstruction in philosophy*. In Boydston, J. (ed.) *John Dewey: The Middle Works, Vol.12: 1920* (pp. 70-201). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University.
- Dewey, J. (1958 {1925}). *Experience and nature*. New York: Dover Press.
- Dewey, J. (1954 {1927}). *The public and its problems*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding language acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *The pedagogy of the oppressed*. M.B. Ramos (trans.), New York: Seabury Press.
- Gonzalez, S. & Burwood, S. (2003). Tacit knowledge and public accounts. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 37 (3), 377-391.
- Jarvis, P. (1983). *Adults and continuing education*. New York: Nichols.
- Kelly, G. (1963). *A theory of personality*. New York: Norton.
- Knowles, M. (1970). *The modern practice of adult education*. New York: Association Press.
- Knowles, M. (1984). *Applying modern principles of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Krashen, S. & Terrill, T. (1983). *The Natural Approach: Language acquisition in the classroom*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Oakeshott, M. (1962). *Rationalism in politics*. London: Methuen.
- O'Dwyer, S. (2001). The classical conservative challenge to pragmatism. *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, XXXVII(4), 491-515.
- Paul, D. (2003). *Teaching English to children in Asia*. Hong Kong: Longman Asia.
- Polyani, C. (1958). *Personal knowledge: Towards a post-critical philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pratt, D. (1988). Andragogy as a relational construct. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 38(3), 160-181.
- Rutherford, J. (1987). *Second language grammar*. Longman: Harlow.
- Salmon, P. (1995). *Psychology in the classroom*. Cassell: London.
- Wajnryb, R. (1999). *Classroom observation tasks: A resource book for language teachers and trainers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, M. & Burden, R. (1997). *Psychology for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yoell, S. (2000). *Investigating autonomy: A cultural consideration of learner training*. URL: <http://www.yoell.fsnet.co.uk/SLA%20ESSAY.htm> [accessed March 12, 2006].
- 

## About the Author

**Shaun O'Dwyer** teaches English as a foreign language to children and adults at David English House in Hiroshima Prefecture, Japan. He is also an adjunct research fellow in the School of Philosophy, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. He has published articles on pragmatism, philosophical conservatism, comparative philosophy, metaphysics, and the philosophy of English language education.

---

© Copyright rests with authors. Please cite TESL-EJ appropriately.

**Editor's Note:** The HTML version contains no page numbers. Please use the [PDF version](#) of this article for citations.